

Sexual representation: introduction

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In the summer of 1986, the Attorney General's commission on pornography released its final report, setting a new stage in the politics of sexual representation in the U.S.. Predictably, given the skewed sympathies of the commission members, the report viewed with alarm the status of the porn industry and its products. Extended staff investigations into police reports linked porn with the Mafia. Also, the report gave a general discussion of how pornography victimizes women and children based on the commission's road show of hearings. Attorney General Ed Meese received the report and announced his setting up a new federal task force. Although nothing immediately developed, it is clear that the report and task force establish the groundwork for a future set of media events coupled with police repression, like the much inflated and publicized "war on drugs" that the Reagan administration created in the summer of 86.

While the American Civil Liberties Union, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, and *Playboy* and *Penthouse* publishing companies responded with detailed refutations of the commission's findings regarding free speech issues, some other aspects of the report deserve attention by media activists. Most significantly, the report gave up on the attempt to censor literary material, which was the major battleground of the 50s and 60s. The new target for rightwing censorship is visual material, especially magazines with softcore or hardcore pictures, and videotapes. Already in the wake of the report, some convenience store chains have stopped carrying *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, particularly in the South. And also in the South and parts of small town and rural United States, video rental stores have been pressured to stop renting porn tapes, which are usually considered a very significant percentage of the home video business.

Bolstered by very selective reading and interpretation of behavioral science research into the effects of visual pornography, the commission report clearly marks out the grounds of a new battle between right and left over the representation of gender and sexuality in the media. It is possible that not much new will happen. The report was clearly another Reagan gesture to the New Right's social agenda, but the commission was largely a show event and had a bare bones budget. Given the current disarray of the Reagan administration, pornography could well fall into the cracks and not become a national issue. However, it is

always possible that as the Iran/Contragate events unfold, an administration looking for a hot media issue to distract the public will suddenly produce a set of raids on porn merchants with sensational coverage of kiddie porn and bondage images.

Other recent events also have to be taken into account in trying to understand the political situation and potential of issues around sexual representation. The Supreme Court's ruling on a Georgia case in 1986, finding homosexual practices unprotected by privacy law, was in many ways a "last straw" for many gay men and lesbians, who now see the need for increased political activity to resist attacks on their sexuality. The U.S. Surgeon General, a man chosen for his extremely conservative views on abortion, repeatedly is calling for sex education in the schools and increased awareness of "safe sex" practices to combat the AIDs epidemic, although the fundamentalist right has reviled his stand. This spectacle around AIDs education shows that contradictions within the ruling coalition can erupt into public discourse. And feminist anti-pornography organizing, which had a leading position within the women's movement in the early 80s, has evolved into a minority faction using extremely divisive tactics, as evidenced in that faction's failed effort to enact its legal agenda in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The questions of pornography and the representation of sexuality are volatile. The changes in feminist theory, in the nature of the porn industry with video proliferation, and in progressive organizing strategies in the past several years have all been dramatic. It's in this context of a rapidly changing situation filled with contradictions and practical problems that we present another set of articles on the topic, following up on our initial survey of the issues in JUMP CUT no. 26 and our extended presentation in JUMP CUT no. 30. But this is by no means the last word on the matter, and we expect to have new articles in forthcoming issues.

We begin with "Bright Victory," a photonovel by Canadian feminists, which underlines the personal politics of the pornography issue and which mocks the "disinterested" pretensions of men discussing porn. Next, a reprint of Joanna Russ's article, "Pornography and the Doubleness of Sex for Women," provides an important dimension to the feminist analysis of porn and other sexual fantasy material. The noted feminist science fiction writer emphasizes the importance of considering both pleasurable fantasy and threatening reality in understanding how women respond to sexual imagery. Next, acknowledging voices often ignored in discussing pornography, we present an interview with several women porn stars on the nature of the industry and the possibilities for a different, female produced, heterosexual porn cinema.

The next three articles deal with three films that present a woman's revenge. By depicting women's physical action when they confront male threat and power, these films raise important questions about how women can be depicted in cinematic narration. Looking at a Philippines martial arts film, FIRECRACKER, Gina Marchetti examines a female central character who has attributes and abilities in sexual enticement as well as in physical defense and aggression. In GIVING WAY, independent filmmaker Gaylon Emerzian shows a woman turning

against her attacker, and critic Jake Jakaitis examines the mechanisms of this reversal. By considering the Hollywood feature *THE SEDUCTION*, Patricia Erens shows how a female protagonist can be presented both as the object of masculine looking within the film and as the revenging subject attacking her male assailant. These films, rewriting the "woman as victim" theme of the dominant patriarchal cinema, allow for a reconsideration of female images and their appropriation.

Issues of sexual and gender representation are central to most media work. The relentless drive of capitalism to commodify and market even the most personal and usually private aspects of people's lives means that sexuality comes under the logic of commercial exploitation. At the same time, as feminist and gay analysis has repeatedly shown, sexuality is a crucial point of political contention — on the level of the state and its police powers and on the level of individual private life. We must continue to analyze issues of sexual representation. This is essential if we are to understand the role of the media in supporting the dominant ideologies and to create effective strategies for producing a counter-media. To this end, we invite responses and further discussion of these issues.

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